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## VIDEO PERFORMANCE REVIEW

### Power to the Panza!: Feminist Body Politics in *The Panza Monologues*

Patricia Herrera

*The Panza Monologues. DVD. Written by Virginia Grise and Irma Mayorga. Performed by Virginia Grise. Music by Los Flacosos. Filmed live at Plaza de la Raza's Margo Albert Theatre, Los Angeles, California. 2009.*

Virginia Grise and Irma Mayorga conceived *The Panza Monologues* (2004) when they worked together in San Antonio's Esperanza Peace and Justice Center. They noticed that the work of activist women was rooted in a deep understanding of their body politics. After documenting the pláticas of women of all ages from throughout the United States, Grise and Mayorga drew on these stories and wove them into a solo performance piece, which evolved into *The Panza Monologues*. Grise and Mayorga are not new to the world of theatre. Mayorga is an activist-artist-scholar who has worked with New WORLD Theater, the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, and the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center. Her play *Cascarrones* was selected as part of O'Neill Playwrights Conference in 2003 and she wrote the foreword for Cherrie Moraga's anthology of plays *The Hungry Woman: The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* and *Heart of the Earth: A Popul Vuh Story* (2001). Similarly, Grise is a cultural worker, writer, performer, and educator. Her play *blu* is winner of the 2010 Yale Drama Series competition and Grise was a 2009 Playwrights' Center Jerome Fellow. Grise and Mayorga's *The Panza Monologues* has been performed in numerous theaters and universities, including Cara Mia Theatre in Dallas and Fort Worth, Texas; allgo: Tillery Street Theatre, Austin, Texas; Cal State Los Angeles; and University of Colorado, Boulder.

As natives from San Antonio, Grise and Mayorga aspired to receive a full production at Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, the largest community-based, multidisciplinary nonprofit organization in the United States. However, negotiations fell through when the organization's director decided that the project did not merit financial support. Instead, they performed at Plaza de la Raza, Los Angeles, which is the venue documented in the DVD version of *The Panza Monologues*.

The last two decades of the twentieth century have seen an expansion of Latina artists creating monologue-driven drama and performance, voices that include Carmelita Tropicana, Marga Gomez, Monica Palacios, Adelina Anthony, Janis Astor del Valle, Nao Bustamante, Elia Arce, Coco Fusco, Dulce Maria Solis, and Nilaja Sun, among others. The power of such work is derived from the ways these female artists embody and perform political identities that bridge the private into the public sphere. They stand in front of the audience revealing who they are and what they stand for. To invoke the title of Jo Bonney's anthology of works by American monologists, their immediate bodies are under "extreme exposure," emerging as primary sources of representation, interpretation, and intervention.

*The Panza Monologues*, written by Grise and Mayorga and performed by Grise, exposes the daily experiences of Latinas as bound to the body politics of the panza. The Spanish term panza literally refers to the belly, which too often women tuck and hide as a result of cultural conditioning that defines this part of the female body as shameful and excessive. In Grise and Mayorga's text, the panza serves as a physical reminder of how body image shapes the experiences of women of all ages. Notably, it is also defined as a metaphor not just of life experience but also of origins. The panza is the core, where life begins and ends, where the umbilical cord binds people to the past, present, and future.

Every story needs a beginning, and so we learn that the panza originates from the workings of the goddesses who wanted nothing more than to stay warm and to make music from their own bodies. The audience participates in the making of history told from the center of the panza as they join Grise and declare: “¡Que viva la panza! ¡Que viva la panza!”

Just as the goddesses deem la panza as sacred, Grise renders the theatrical stage as a sacred gathering space, visually emphasized by the set with a large altar that stands backstage center adorned by colorful tapestry, candles, flowers, pictures, baskets, bowls, and pillows. Notably, the altar also features books by feminist thinkers, like Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and Yolanda Broyles-González as well as Jo Bonney's previously mentioned landmark text, *Extreme Exposure: An Anthology of Solo Performance Texts from the Twentieth Century* (2000). These offerings represent intellectual food and the stage, an architectural panza, like the belly, a space of celebrating life. Marking the theatre as sacred foment a sense of intimacy with the audience, one that acknowledges spirituality and cultural specificity. The close-up shots of Grise add another vital layer of camaraderie, as it appears she is platicando with the live audience, and by extension, the DVD viewer. Grise is a masterful storyteller. However, it is not simply her artistry as an actor that makes *The Panza Monologues* a powerful performance. Story is shared as a form of invited reflection on the social pressures, the traumatic growing up stories, the functional and dysfunctional relationships, and the experiences that dent the psyche, yet, when told, make one grow stronger in the telling. *The Panza Monologues* is about the refusal to bind or hide vital parts of life experiences.

Throughout the performance Grise is accompanied by Latin rhythms and Mexican melodies played by Los Flacos (a musical group that includes Eduardo Arenas, Laura Cambrón, Alexandro Hernández, Jacqueline

Munguía). Titles, such as “Panza Girl Manifesto,” “Political Panza,” and “Panza Brujería,” are projected on the screen and set the tone and mode of the story. Moving from moments that are hilarious, witty, and then serious, Grise graces the stage with stories that clearly stand in dialogue with Eve Ensler’s landmark *The Vagina Monologues*. Mayorga and Grise’s *The Panza Monologues* share in a focus on women’s relationship to their bodies; however, they further explore womanhood as rooted in women’s relationships to the various social spaces they inhabit, whether at home, in a club, or a sewing factory.

When displaying the sensual power of wearing tacones, Grise comes to terms with how her body has transformed over time. She no longer is “cha cha thin;” rolls of flesh now hang out from her tacones. In making peace with her curvaceous body and round panza, she publicly claims the beauty and strength of her thick figure. This serves not only as a testimony for herself, but as a way of empowering other women.

Grise relates to the audience with another dose of humor when she attempts to suck in her panza to fit into a pair of jeans. Alas, after all the jumping and tugging to fit into the jeans, Grise faces her biggest challenge: the roll of flesh bulging out from the zipper. Here, handy dandy pliers are brought to the rescue. She uses them to pull up the zipper and then victoriously stuffs the panza into her pants. This triumphant moment reveals women’s obsession with controlling and literally constraining the body so as to succumb to the hourglass figure young women are conditioned to unquestionably admire.

While this scene serves to reflect anxieties about body image, it also connects the audience with other laboring bodies, such as the seamstresses who sew jeans for a living. We see a series of black and white pictures of women working in the fields or at home. These images embrace the long line of large-figured women

who have used their bodies to surpass social and economic hardships. Notably, Grise comments that “the reality of living is feeding our panza,” and asks, “If our bodies break down, how are we going to do all this work?” She reveals how women often digest social troubles that, like a parasite, threaten to take over the entire body. The audience bears witness to Grise’s remembering and narrating history from within la panza to pose vital questions: How do we translate the bodily manifestations of social pressures to action? What can we do to transform the body into an active agent for social change? The message is clear: “We must take care of our panza.” We must not let social forces wear us down.

As Grise demonstrates, this is not an easy task as there are several barriers that inhibit change. We are reminded of the devastating crisis of obesity among African Americans and Latinas/os as a performer dancing la zapateada accentuates each projected fact with forceful clattering sounds against the wooden platform. In addition to obesity, there is the existing issue of domestic violence and the helplessness that a child feels in watching her dad punch her mom’s pregnant panza. Grise makes the tenuous relationship between health and body image strikingly apparent when she recalls her sister’s drastic panza loss after her marriage collapsed. During this critical moment in her life, many admired her new look. Behind her thin body, diabetes was killing her from the inside out, as her sugar level increased day after day.

Alongside these harsh stories, there are panza-positive stories that embrace the roundness and fullness of women’s bodies. Grise calls for pro-panza policies, wittingly expanding the feminist mantra of the personal as political to “the panza is political.” It is not often that theatrical works are documented and made available to educators and a broader viewing community. And when the opportunity arises, it is video-performances like *The Panza Monologues* that function not only to affirm the history of Latina voices, but to also cement

the history of the theatre-making process within the Latina community, challenging and expanding the terrain of American drama, thereby earning the proclamation, "Power to the Panza!"